

Why Cavalry Officers Should Have Their Own Branch

by CPT Nicholas M. Charnley

In the modern U.S. military, the cavalry holds a unique place on the battlefield. Each brigade combat team (BCT) retains its own type of cavalry squadron to rapidly and accurately answer information requirements that facilitate the commander's timely decision making to seize, gain and maintain the initiative.

To help their respective BCTs build a common operating picture, each squadron boasts a specific vehicle and personnel configuration: humvee, Stryker and Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV). And while all types of cavalry units follow the same doctrine and perform the same missions, they each also fulfill distinct functions for their armor or infantry BCT "customers," whether mounted or dismounted.

Despite its distinctive and vital niche in the Army, staff officers at the operational level often struggle with understanding cavalry's exact role and how to best employ the squadron to help the BCT achieve its mission. Similarly, officers within the cavalry squadron struggle to communicate its capabilities and limitations to the parent BCT. Much of this confusion stems from the struggle of former armor and infantry officers, who do not receive any mandatory cavalry professional-military education (PME) to adapt to their new assignments and convert their doctrinal knowledge from offensive and defensive operations to reconnaissance and security (R&S) operations.

In essence, the cavalry remains a profession without professionals. Formally breaking cavalry officers away from the infantry and armor professions by establishing their own branch affords the Army the opportunity to give R&S the attention it deserves. It would enable the Army to finally staff its formations with fully qualified and confident cavalry leaders capable of facilitating the success of their squadron and BCT. While exemplary officers within cavalry formations currently exist, most will agree it took them until troop command to fully understand R&S operations and that their PME did not adequately prepare them for life in the squadron.

Debate continues

Nearly a decade ago, military members widely debated the merits of separating the cavalry function from the Armor Branch or redesigning the two specialties under a combined profession. Widely considered the landmark article on the subject, CPT Ken Segelhorst addresses the issue in "Keeping the Sabers Sharp: Maintaining Relevance in the Modern Era."¹ However, he offers a divergent approach from the current proposal: he favors subordinating armor under a new Cavalry Branch and redefining mounted operations to preserve resources and manpower in a downsizing and modernizing military. He does not address the idea of a new cavalry-officer PME, but instead he points to current courses to satisfy gaps in proficiencies.

In "Ideas on Cavalry," authors CPTs Joshua Suthoff and Michael Culler diverge from Segelhorst's thesis and discuss the need for distinguishing the Cavalry Branch from armor, standing up new operating equipment and clarifying training requirements to qualify personnel. However, their proposed solution of sending personnel to already existing opportunity schooling further highlights the underlying issue discussed here: the lack of a standardized, mandatory PME qualification process for cavalry officers.²

CPT Nathan Jennings, in "Cavalry Branch: a Redesignation for the 21st Century," largely agrees with Segelhorst, calling for a streamlined and rebranded Cavalry Branch that includes both the combined-arms and R&S functions. However, he neglects to outline any clear way forward, settling to outline the issues within the current model.³

1LT Kier Elmonairy, in "Elite Mechanized Forces in an Age of Expeditionary Operations" tackles the issue of force structure, calling for the fielding of a new special operations-type armored-combat regiment capable of rapid expeditionary deployment. He too offers no solution on how to streamline the training of cavalry officers, merely pointing to the current voluntary courses as potential options.⁴

MAJ Thomas Rebuck, in "Cavalry: the Mounted Arm of Maneuver," advocates discarding the cavalry as an R&S-specific unit and combining armor and cavalry into a general-purpose mounted combat-arms unit. The issue with his idea lies in assuming that all military units are capable of, and willing to, conduct R&S to the detail necessary in today's modern world when tasked as a secondary mission-essential task.⁵

CPT Thomas Spolizino, in “Not Just Infantry With Tanks: Who We Should Be and Why the Army Needs Us to Be It,” comes closest to the subject of this study, calling for a doctrinal redefinition of the cavalry and a refinement of its tactical battlefield purpose. However, he keeps much of his discussion theoretical and ideological, and he only briefly suggests that the Army realign PME for cavalry officers without proposing any solutions.⁶

As clearly demonstrated, previous military officers critically and enthusiastically broached the subject of a distinct Cavalry Branch. Most diverge from the current proposal, instead calling for a subordination of armor within a new Cavalry Branch or emphasizing combined arms rather than R&S operations. Also, through no fault of the authors, developments in military doctrine and real-world operations render much of their prior work outdated. Written in the early years of the 2010s, their ideas came out of the counterinsurgency fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. At a time when all formations, regardless of branch, largely conducted or supported small-scale offensive operations, the Army de-emphasized units dedicated to R&S.

Depending on non-organic assets

The wide availability of upper-tier intelligence; technologically advanced and highly specialized observation equipment; and close cooperation with Special Operations Forces (SOF) caused many conventional units to depend on non-organic sources to conduct surveillance for them. At the time, cavalry, and many other branch functions, were considered non-essential. Dependence on specialized sensors and SOF for surveillance worked against a relatively small, limited and asymmetric enemy in a large but relatively static operational environment.

However, the conventional Army’s primary focus, as rediscovered in the wake of Russia’s activity in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region, needs to be on being able to find, fix and finish a near-peer conventional force in a highly mobile and multi-dimensional operational environment. This calls for an emphasis on active, dynamic reconnaissance to quickly answer mission-specific information requirements using organic personnel and equipment. In a kinetic conflict between near-peer threats, SOF and all its special equipment is able to provide only limited support to a conventional force, as they serve a much different but equally important function.

To briefly clarify: surveillance requires mass and unfiltered information collection and reporting. This must be followed by thorough ex-post-facto analysis to determine its utility and actionability for future operations. Reconnaissance demands an active analysis of information as it is gathered, and then reporting a refined and useable product to drive predetermined decisions. Evidence of the shift from surveillance to reconnaissance exists within the force itself as the conventional Army consciously continues to move away from surveillance outside of the SOF community.

Previous authors made mention of battlefield-surveillance brigade plus long-range surveillance, reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition units as formations capable of performing R&S, freeing the cavalry to focus on combined-arms operations. None of those units exist anymore. Infantry and armor units cannot perform R&S to the level of detail and precision required to facilitate the success of the modern BCT. They simply lack the doctrinal knowledge and materiel resources. The standardized and redesigned cavalry squadrons, enhanced by BCT organic surveillance sensors, fulfill this function as intended. The Army wants BCTs to perform reconnaissance, and they want them to do it themselves.

More cav PME needed

All authors called for more schooling of cavalry officers, but none proposed a time-sensitive or cost-effective curriculum, standardized and reorganized under an independent branch-component training headquarters. In the Army’s current model, infantry and armor officers, the feeder branches for cavalry billets, receive very little (if any) formal education in R&S doctrine.

To make matters worse, both infantry and armor officers take vastly different career paths. At best, they first come together collaboratively in the cavalry world when they attend one of the following R&S voluntary courses. At worst, they first meet when they are already newly assigned to a cavalry unit, trying to plan and execute unfamiliar and unwieldy R&S missions to find answers they do not know to questions they don’t understand.

On the other side, BCTs often lack operations staff officers with any experience in cavalry squadrons. This creates a customer unit that does not know what to ask for or how to ask for it.

The Infantry Basic Officer Leader's Course (IBOLC) neglects R&S operations altogether, understandably emphasizing complex small-unit offensive tasks such as attacks, ambushes, raids and movements-to-contact. Also, IBOLC does not adequately incorporate mounted operations (except as a mode of transportation for the infantryman rather than as a combat or observation platform) into its curriculum, focusing almost exclusively on dismounted operations over limited distances. Infantry officers serving in cavalry formations arrive at their new assignments completely unprepared to conduct R&S operations; the only reconnaissance training conducted at IBOLC, if any, may be the extremely limited "leaders' recon," which is little more than a hasty visual confirmation of an intended objective prior to a planned offensive or defensive operation. Few information requirements are answered other than "yup, there it is!"

While an important function of infantry operations, the leaders' recon follows cavalry doctrine only in the most basic, diluted sense and helps only the unit conducting the mission, not the all-important "customer" (the BCT). An IBOLC graduate leaves the schoolhouse without an understanding of R&S fundamentals, let alone an ability to conduct missions, plan information collection (IC) or answer information requirements for the squadron or BCT.

Armor officers fare little better. Their Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course (ABOLC) includes a few weeks of R&S doctrine on the back-end of the program of instruction (PoI), mostly on the humvee platform. Even then, the missions usually devolve into a game of hide-and-seek, where the tank platoon and scout platoon square off in a movement-to-contact, an unlikely and highly discouraged scenario for cavalry units in a conventional fight.

However, in recent years the Armor School dictated program cuts, shortening the R&S portion of ABOLC to place more emphasis on tank training. While the importance of detailed training on the M1 Abrams certainly justifies an increase in instructional time, providing it at the expense of R&S training presents a significant opportunity cost.

Many armor officers report directly to a cavalry squadron upon graduation from ABOLC and never operate a tank for the rest of their careers. In essence, they spent half a year at a course that gave them almost no practical technical or tactical instruction for their new profession. While an in-depth knowledge of armor operations and a cursory understanding of R&S fundamentals certainly helps understand the information requirements of their BCT customers, ABOLC offers little in the way of actually teaching officers how to plan and execute R&S missions or IC.

Problems with voluntary courses

If neither BOLC provides adequate cavalry training, how does an officer obtain the knowledge necessary to succeed? Luckily, in the current model the Army offers several excellent courses on R&S operations at all tactical echelons. The problem lies in the fact that these courses are all voluntary, with vaguely defined prerequisites, and exist autonomously outside of the structured PME.

The Infantry School's **Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader's Course** (RSLC) provides instruction on small-unit dismounted R&S operations at the team and squad level. The curriculum includes in-depth individual technical training on observation and communication platforms, squad-level troop-leading procedures (TLPs) and dismounted reconnaissance doctrine.

However, RSLC limits itself in the following three ways:

- It restricts its curriculum mainly to infantry-battalion scout platoons and special-operations units. These units perform very limited types of reconnaissance which, while important at the battalion-and-below level, do not nest its curriculum within the bigger-picture operational needs of the main R&S customer, the BCT.
- A lack of marketing for RSLC among the primary branch PME schools such as ABOLC and IBOLC limits its audience. Few new officers on their way to a cavalry squadron actually attend RSLC. Most attendees are exclusively from the Infantry or Special Forces Branches and are bound for a battalion scout platoon or special-operations unit.
- A large portion of the RSLC PoI focuses on surveillance or the passive-sensor-based observation of an objective. While an important function within the special-operations community, surveillance provides little help in quickly answering BCT information requirements in a battlefield constantly becoming larger, more mobile and multi-dimensional.

In short, RSLC offers some exceptional technical training, but its tactics are too narrow in scope to serve the Army's larger R&S needs.

The Armor School's **Scout Leader's Course** (SLC), formerly the Army Reconnaissance Course, provides instruction on small-unit mounted and dismounted R&S at the squad and platoon level. The curriculum focuses on squad- and platoon-level TLPs and on executing various types of mounted and dismounted R&S missions. Unlike RSLC, SLC deliberately targets officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) reporting to cavalry squadrons as its core audience and places an emphasis on tactical proficiency rather than technical expertise.

SLC limits itself in the following three ways:

- It lacks in-depth training on individual technical skills such as optics and communications platforms, choosing instead to provide only basic familiarization. Students will see a lot of the same equipment that RSLC uses, but they will not walk away from the course as proficient as their RSLC counterparts.
- A lack of cross-branch marketing for SLC limits its audience and publicity across the force. Though configured to provide instruction for all three types of BCT cavalry squadrons (infantry, Stryker and armor), the school receives most of its attention and candidates from the armor world. Other branches (infantry) view it as a course strictly for armor officers if they know about it at all.
- Since the Armor School treats it as a feeder course for its officers graduating from ABOLC and heading to cavalry squadrons, few slots are given to officers and NCOs already out in the force. This limits SLC's audience, as slots become precious commodities set aside specifically for ABOLC graduates.

The requirement for more certification schools delays the entry of many junior officers into their new formations by several months or more as they wait for an opportunity to attend the course. This does not even factor in platform-specific technical training such as the Bradley Leader's Course (BLC) or Stryker Leader's Course. In theory, new armor officers must attend a minimum of three courses to be fully qualified to serve in a cavalry squadron fresh out of their commissioning source (ABOLC/IBOLC, SLC and BLC/Stryker Leader's Course). That amounts to a minimum of eight to 12 months before reporting to a new duty station, assuming no gap between course-start dates.

More typically, a newly commissioned infantry or armor officer spends 12 to 18 months waiting on schools before actually even seeing a line unit. Some even earn performance-evaluation reports or promotions to the next rank without ever having held an actual duty position within the force.

For seasoned leaders heading to a command or staff billet, the Armor School's **Cavalry Leader's Course** (CLC) provides thorough instruction on R&S doctrine at the company and squadron level. The course focuses entirely on TLPs and the military decision-making process (MDMP) for executing mounted and dismounted R&S missions in all three types of cavalry squadrons. As such, the curriculum requires students to arrive with a considerable background knowledge of R&S fundamentals, tactics and MDMP to plan effectively.

Probably the most complete of the three R&S courses, CLC deliberately targets officers and NCOs on their way to assignments in cavalry squadrons as future commanders or staff members. However, CLC shares its one major weakness with SLC: limited marketing. Widely hailed within the armor world, few infantry or Stryker cavalry squadrons send officers or NCOs to the school, even though its curriculum addresses all three formations equally.

Given that the Army currently fields three excellent R&S schools that address operations at all levels, one may be tempted to question criticism of the current model. However, a little investigation reveals several issues. First, the three courses fall under two schools and therefore share no defined unity of purpose. RSLC falls under the Infantry School's Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, while SLC and CLC fall under the Armor School's 316th Cavalry Brigade. The three courses all certify their instructors differently and are not required to share a common operational picture or demonstrate the same baseline doctrinal, tactical and technical knowledge of R&S.

Ask an RSLC, SLC or CLC instructor about IC planning, for example, and a student will receive three different, and probably contradictory, answers. Courses that all teach the same doctrine, while catering to different echelons, should all have the same doctrinal baseline and work toward continuity from one level to the next. Instead, these three courses exist in a vacuum under two different command groups and often contradict or undo the work of the other, creating significant knowledge gaps.

Second, the Armor Branch monopolizes SLC, treating it like a pipeline school. All ABOLC officers assigned to a cavalry squadron are expected to attend, similar to how the infantry treats Ranger School as a “mandatory” voluntary course where failure or non-attendance carries career-ending implications. This flawed line of thinking takes slots away from IBOLC graduates and officers and NCOs already out in the force who may otherwise attend.

Cavalry Branch needed

Creating a distinct, independent Cavalry Branch remedies these problems. Instead of needing to attend three or more different voluntary schools in addition to required PME, the Army can create a Cavalry BOLC (CBOLC) and Cavalry Captain’s Career Course (CCCC).

CBOLC could adopt much of SLC’s curriculum and merely expand the course length to allow two to three weeks of tactical and technical training per platform (dismounted, humvee, Stryker and BFV). CBOLC could also incorporate some of RSLC’s individual technical training on optics and communication systems but discard or shorten the niche and somewhat antiquated surveillance instruction. This would stretch the length of a potential CBOLC course to 10 to 15 weeks, in line with the other combat-arms officer branch-qualification courses.

Likewise, CCCC could borrow from CLC’s PoI but expand the course length to focus on troop-level TLPs to the same depth as CLC, which currently addresses squadron-level MDMP. Spending two to three weeks on each type of cavalry squadron at both the troop and squadron level would stretch a hypothetical CCCC to 12 to 18 weeks, similar to the current active-duty Maneuver Captain’s Career Course (MCCC) model.

This model allows the Army to keep RSLC, SLC and CLC as revised independent courses, realigned under a new Cavalry School training-command group. RSLC could restrict its training audience to Soldiers assigned to SOF units, to Soldiers holding an 18-series military-occupation specialty (MOS) or to those reassigned to battalion scout platoons. This would allow RSLC to rebrand itself as a course specifically geared toward dismounted-surveillance and special-reconnaissance operations.

The advanced individual training for the cavalry-scout MOS (19D) might also consider adopting part of its curriculum, teaching the more basic individual surveillance techniques as well as the technical equipment proficiencies.

SLC could limit its attendees to officers and NCOs already in the force who are transitioning into a cavalry squadron troop-level billet. CLC could expand its audience from officers and NCOs transitioning to command and staff roles within a cavalry squadron, including individuals from the combined-arms professions seeking a BCT staff operations position and who still require an in-depth understanding of IC. Ideally, RSLC would establish a technical, execution-driven knowledge base for junior NCOs heading to a SOF unit or battalion scout platoon.

SLC would then transition to the next level: planning and executing at the tactical level with junior officers and senior NCOs heading to an actual cavalry platoon or troop within a squadron. CLC would culminate a cavalry officer’s R&S knowledge for senior-squadron-staff NCOs or officers bound for troop command or squadron/BCT staff positions.

Instead, all three current courses fall short because they do not plan for any continuity in their graduates’ R&S careers beyond the walls of their own schoolhouses.

While one might argue the cost-effectiveness of such a drastic revision, closer scrutiny reveals a relatively small increase in expenditure. Existing R&S courses can trim their budgets proportionately as their audiences shrink and remove or alter portions of their curriculums that would be covered by the new Cavalry Branch PME. ABOLC, IBOLC and MCCC could also decrease their budgets proportionately with their audiences, as a portion of their former students would now attend the new CBOLC and CCCC. The money saved from the streamlined R&S schools and PME could help offset the costs of standing up the new cavalry PME.

Similarly, former instructors from the Infantry and Armor Schools could move to the new Cavalry School as the training-command groups realign, requiring the Army to hire only a minimum amount of new personnel for staffing.

In short, funds need to be moved and marginally increased vs. massively overhauled in any significant way.

Evolving battlefield

Today's battlefield constantly evolves, creating complex and unique information requirements for the modular BCT. They increasingly rely more and more on their organic cavalry squadrons to quickly and accurately provide real-time feedback about terrain and threats within the operating environment.

The strenuous demands of the R&S profession require specialized, in-depth tactical and technical training for its leaders. Currently, the only feasible way to obtain the education necessary to be a successful cavalry officer requires more voluntary schooling, above and beyond required PME. While not an issue for active-duty officers, Reservists face time and financial constraints, as well as limited course slots and funding for non-PME schooling. Also, the BOLC-heavy audience at the Armor School's R&S courses discourages officers and NCOs from the force from attending prior to reassignment to cavalry formations.

The Army would benefit from staffing its cavalry profession with fully qualified professionals. If, as the old joke implies, the Army issues everything that someone needs for success, why does it not issue itself a Cavalry Branch?

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Notes

¹ CPT Ken Segelhorst, "Keeping the Sabers Sharp: Maintaining Relevance in the Modern Era," *ARMOR* November-December 2012.

² CPT Michael J. Culler and CPT Joshua T. Suthoff, "Ideas on Cavalry," *ARMOR*, October-December, 2013.

³ CPT Nathan A. Jennings, "Cavalry Branch: A Redesignation for the 21st Century," *ARMOR*, January-February 2014.

⁴ 1LT Kier Elmonairy, "Elite Mechanized Forces in an Age of Expeditionary Deployment," *ARMOR*, March-June 2014.

⁵ MAJ Thomas A. Rebuck, "Cavalry: the Mounted Arm of Maneuver," *ARMOR*, March-June 2014.

⁶ CPT Thomas Spolizino, "Not Just Infantry With Tanks: Who We Should Be and Why the Army Needs Us to Be It," *ARMOR*, July-September 2014.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABOLC – Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course

BCT – brigade combat team

BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle

BLC – Bradley Leader's Course

BOLC – basic officer leader's course

CBOLC – Cavalry Basic Officer Leader's Course

CCCC – Cavalry Captain's Career Course

CLC – Cavalry Leader's Course

IBOLC – Infantry Basic Officer Leader's Course

IC – information collection

MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

MDMP – military decision-making process

MOS – military-occupation specialty

NCO – noncommissioned officer

PME – professional military education

Pol – program of instruction

R&S – reconnaissance and security

RSLC – Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader's Course

SLC – Scout Leader's Course (Armor School)

SOF – Special Operations Forces

TLP – troop-leading procedures